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Bereavement and Continuing Bonds in Cross-cultural Perspective: UK and Japan

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Abstract

This article takes a cross-cultural look at responses to death and loss in the UK and Japan, post-industrial societies with very different cultural heritages. By reporting the experiences of bereaved individuals, it shows how they negotiate mixed and competing cultural messages as they try to understand their loss. There are some surprising similarities, as well as differences, not only between but within each culture, dispelling any notion of a typically British or Japanese way of grieving.

Interest in the way Japanese people relate to their ancestors has been fuelled by growing appreciation of the importance of 'continuing bonds' for bereaved people in the West. It is often assumed by western commentators that ancestral rites, embedded in cohesive families, help Japanese people to grieve, contrasting with more individualistic and fragmented western societies where continuing bonds are private and one-sided. The interviews with bereaved individuals in the UK and Japan on which this article is based, however, suggest a much more complex and ambiguous picture.

Indeed, Alfons Deeken (2004) has cast doubts about the continuing value of the ancestral tradition for contemporary Japanese people, particularly certain sectors of society and types of bereavement. In so doing he provides a glimpse of Japanese culture that suggests it may be less homogenous than tends to be assumed. Not everyone finds meaning or comfort in the status quo. In any case, individuals do not blindly follow the dictates of culture, but rather adapt and revise these to reflect individual and personal circumstances, priorities and agendas. Furthermore, just like the contemporary West, Japan, as a post-industrial society, provides a variety of mixed and often competing cultural messages about how death should be handled. Traditional ancestral ideas and forms exist alongside those promoted by contemporary institutions, such as medical and funeral professions, religious institutions, bereavement support organisations and the media, together with popular wisdom and everyday socialisation.

Thus, in spite of strong pressures for social conformity, I was to discover that contemporary Japanese society displays the diversity and complexity that tends to be associated with more individualistic and multicultural Western societies. Indeed, such diversity and complexity was well demonstrated by the bereaved individuals I interviewed in the UK from 2003 to 2005 and Japan from 2008 to 2009, as they negotiated the resources and restraints of their culture. The Japanese emphasis on social solidarity and interdependency did not preclude individualism and the valuing

of personal choice. Nor did Western individualism rule out a more interdependent experience of identity in the UK.

Interviewing in the UK

In the interviews I held with twenty-five bereaved individuals, 15 women and 10 men, aged 17 to 63, in Bath, I was struck by the extent to which dead loved ones (6 mothers, 7 fathers, 2 partners, 3 grandmothers, 2 grandfathers, 2 great-grandmothers, 1 great aunt, 1 aunt, 1 godson, and 2 friends) were experienced as forming an integral and crucial part of the survivor's sense of self (Valentine, 2008). In a society that emphasises individualism, these interview narratives reflected a more interdependent experience of identity. In the words of Elisabeth, a woman of 50, talking about her dead husband, *"...I can't let him go, he's still part of me and always will be..."* Losing a loved one could be experienced as diminishing one's sense of self, like a bodily wound, as conveyed by Andy, a young man of 17, as he struggled to make sense of his father's death.

It kind of feels like a part of me's gone. It's hard to explain. It's like someone's chopped half my leg off ... and taken it away because it's taken away so much from my life.

For Lynne, a woman in her 50s, her mother's death was experienced as a wound that would never fully heal. Yet it was also felt to be a part of her identity that would always remember her mother, thus associating the pain of loss with the impetus to remember:

"Yes it's still quite raw but there's certain bits of you which they never actually quite heal over.... I think in a way I'd rather feel that than not at least it's sort of paying tribute to her in a way you know I'm not going to forget about her".

Lynne's narrative demonstrated that recalling the experience of loss only served to evoke the sense of a loved one's continuing presence. These experiences of presence were accompanied by an enhancement of the bereaved person's sense of self, relationships with dead loved ones being experienced as *mutually reinforcing*. For example, Andy reported that his bond with his father enabled him to find the energy and motivation to pursue his studies and gain a place at university:

"...like my dad passing away kind of motivated me more to concentrate more on my college work. Like during my A levels - it was just a sort of driving force. That's probably why I'm here. And it's probably made my dad proud" (Andy).

The experience of continuing presence could evoke the need to safeguard a loved one's comfort and well-being, or to care for the person, as in Lynne's recollections of her mother's burial:

"...but I just thought no she must feel very lonely down there somehow - 'cos she was very - absolutely potty about her dog so we put the photograph of her present dog - and the previous one in the coffin with her for company".

Janet, a young woman of 19, tried to make sense of her desire to comfort and protect her friend, who died in a car accident, in the absence of any belief in an afterlife. Her reflections suggested that such impulses arose from a continuing emotional attachment to him.

“But it’s just weird thinking that he’s there and he’s got like no-one looking after him or anything like night after night – it’s just such a cold horrible place really a graveyard ...I suppose it’s conflicting – because I feel I don’t believe in life after death, yet on the other hand I don’t like to think of him being there and not having anyone – like at night”.

Such concerns about deceased loved ones being left ‘alone’, suggested a desire to integrate the dead into the lives of the living. They also conveyed an implicit preoccupation with the well-being of the dead in a culture which tends to focus on the therapeutic needs of bereaved people. Along with the emphasis on mutuality and care, such concern for the body and well-being of deceased loved ones was reminiscent of the way Japanese people are reported to relate to their dead. This dimension of continuing bonds has been identified as a point of contrast with Western bonds, which have been viewed, psychologically, as inner-representations, and, as such, one-sided, the dead taking the role of moral guides (Klass and Goss, 1999). Yet, according to my participants, and in line with some recent sociological studies (Bennett and Bennett, 2000; Hallam et al, 1999) such presence was experienced as both tangible and reciprocal. As such it is reminiscent of the nature of post-mortem relationships as represented in the Japanese ancestral tradition.

Japanese Ancestors

In Japan grief has been treated as less an internal state and more as something people do. The ancestral tradition, *sosen sūhai*, promotes continuing attachments between the living and the dead by means of an elaborate system of collective and domestic rites and observances through which the living play a key role in facilitating the smooth passage of deceased loved ones to the afterlife and eventually ancestorhood (Smith 1974). Encompassing funeral and memorial services, grave visits and home altar (butsudan) rituals, they reflect images of family solidarity, harmony and continuity that transcend the life death boundary. These attachments are based on reciprocity and mutual dependency, the living providing care and comfort for their dead who in turn look out for the living. These ideas are intimately linked to the kinship ties associated with the extended household or *ie* system. Embedded in an agrarian life-style and sense of presence of the natural world, these ties are hierarchically structured, emphasising obedience and loyalty rather than emotional closeness.

Interviewing in Japan

In order to compare the experiences of bereavement in these two societies with very different cultural heritages, I interviewed 17 bereaved Japanese people, 13 women and 4 men, aged 27 to 63, living in Tokyo, about their experiences of losing loved ones (1 wife, 5 husbands, 5 mothers, 3 fathers, 1 brother, 2 sisters, 1 son, 1 unborn child and 2 friends). Four interviews were conducted in English, the others in Japanese with the aid of an interpreter, a Japanese woman, in whose home the interviews were held. I also hoped to learn more about the relationship between traditional ideas and contemporary culture in which the traditional household structure

was on the wane in favour of smaller family units and self-chosen relationships based on emotional dependency rather than duty. Indeed my participants conveyed how ancestral ideas and forms were being revised to reflect the individualising, privatising and secularising of experience. Though the traditional emphasis on the importance of ensuring the well-being of deceased loved ones through appropriate ritual observance was very much in evidence, so was a preoccupation with the therapeutic needs of bereaved people. In some cases the two were experienced as being at odds. In recollecting the funeral, Nanami, a woman of 32, whose husband died suddenly of an aneurysm, described the pressures of being obliged to submerge her own personal sense of loss:

Then our mutual friends came to pay respects to him and burn incense and I had to welcome them and deal with all that. Then I had to plan his funeral and meet the funeral conductor and deal with all that...And I was very sad during the funeral and wake and wanted to scream and wanted it to stop. But I had to deal with people, speak with people.

Yet, traditional forms could be adapted to reduce such pressures, as conveyed by Akiko, a woman in her 30s, in relation to holding her father's funeral at home:

...we had it at home and we played his favourite singer's song throughout the ceremony and we had a very warm - we were able to see him off in a very relaxed atmosphere... It was so much easier - much less pressure.

The needs of personal grief could take precedence over the requirements of tradition, such as burying the ashes on the 49th day. Thus, Arisu, a woman in her 30s, felt unable to part with her mother's ashes. In the absence of any pressure from other family members, she kept them for three years before having them interred:

...the reason for the delay was because I couldn't come to terms with her death. And my siblings respected my wishes.

In contrast, Nanami's insistence on keeping hold of her husband's ashes provoked a dispute with her in-laws. This situation reflected the more intimate nature of contemporary couple relationships and how this may be at odds with the obligations associated with more traditional kinship ties:

So we hadn't decided which grave he was going to go into and I discussed it with my in-laws and they suggested burying his ashes on the 49th day if possible. But I wanted to keep him near me so I refused that offer. But meanwhile my mother got ill so I had to go and visit her - she lives some distance from Tokyo. I couldn't leave his ashes on their own so I took them to his parents' home. While I was with my mother I got a call from my in-laws telling me that they had taken the ashes to the office of the graveyard - there's a place where you can store ashes - because they were so upset that they couldn't keep the ashes near them. So they took them there even though it was against my will.

Traditional ideas could be revised and redefined through combining them with more contemporary understandings. Izanagi, a man in his 40s, conveyed how the desire to care for the dead could ease one's own grief, to produce an interweaving of ancestral

and therapeutic ideas. Thus he undertook to choose his wife's *kaimyo*, the posthumous, honorific name assigned to the deceased person and conventionally chosen by the Buddhist priest. Izanagi's rationale for such non-conformity was that the priest not only did not know his wife as a person, but would have had to come up with something very quickly, with the funeral scheduled to take place the day after her death. Since he had both the time and the knowledge he was thus far more qualified and able to take time to give careful consideration to constructing a name that truly reflected his wife's life and character. He drew attention to the uniqueness of the opportunity he had taken, and that in caring for his wife he was also caring for himself:

When somebody dies they give them a Buddhist name and normally the priest does this - and often they are in a rush because they only have a few days till the ceremony but my father told me that you can prepare this name yourself before someone dies - and the monk probably doesn't know anything about the person and so isn't the best person to come up with the name. So I thought about her character and life in itself and I chose a Chinese character to suit her personality - so I was very happy to be able to name her. Because she liked the ocean I thought about something to do with the ocean and she was a designer so I thought about something to do with her occupation and you know things she liked. So I was able to choose two Chinese characters that have meaning for her instead of the monk choosing them. So I feel like I named her and I think it's a good thing - not many people do this, so I'm lucky that I had chance to do that and so I'm proud about that.

In contrast, Noriko felt obliged to follow the letter and perpetuate traditional forms, even though these meant little more to her than empty gestures:

It's just sort of a typical traditional thing, so in the morning and evening I burn incense - it's very conventional.

Noriko had bought a *butsudan* for her husband in compliance with her mother insisting that it was of vital importance that his spirit had a home. Yet for Noriko it was an outdated tradition that felt inappropriate for a woman living on her own:

Well my mother said to me don't you think you should do something - get him a butsudān - and I said well I think they're a bit sort of naff and for a woman living on my own do I want to have that sort of thing in my room? - It seems a bit kind of odd - but she said no, you should really get one for him - he should have his own room if you like - so that was really the main reason I got the butsudān.

Nor did it provide a location for her relationship with her husband:

To be honest with you - the butsudān has nothing to do with it - but what I feel is that he is talking to me directly and what he's thinking comes straight into my head - so I don't feel I have to go to the butsudān and do anything -

Yet, others improvised their own domestic rites to reflect more personal and individual needs. For example, Takara, a woman of 30, described her husband's 'corner' and how this provided a location for him that felt less permanent than a *butsudan*:

- so I have a corner with his photos and water and some sweets. So for the first six months after he died it supported me... but now I feel his spirit exists - that it is somewhere and so I don't really give strong importance for this corner of his and sometimes I forget to put incense - and I feel that at some point his things won't be there any more. In the early days there were loads of photos but I've now reduced them and there are just one or two now. And we had a very good relationship and he was indispensable to me - that's true, but I'm alive and I want to enjoy my life and one day there might be somebody else and I'm sure my husband will accept that.

For Mieka, a woman in her 40s, it was through making numerous collages that she came to recover her relationship with her brother and meet the needs of her own personal and private grief:

I wanted to try and connect with my brother and heal my sadness. The feeling I had was that by making this that somehow he was returning to me.

Having found little support through traditional forms, she created her own personal ritual, or in Mieka's words, "...this is my version of a butsudan".

Conclusion

The dynamic, creative and improvised ways people relate to their culture can only be captured through listening closely to individual narratives. Then it becomes possible to gain a perspective of bereavement as it forms part of the daily business of living. In this way I was to learn from my interviews with Japanese people that ancestral ideas were far from hegemonic, stable or consistent. Rather, this long-established tradition meant different things to different people. The nature of its role in people's lives could reflect and interact with that of other, sometimes competing factors, particularly a concern with the well-being of grieving individuals. Similarly, my interviews with bereaved people in the UK suggested that our society may not be entirely individualistic. Just as Japanese people were personalising and individualising a set of shared traditions, so British people were forging post-mortem bonds that reflected interdependency, a concern with the well-being of deceased loved ones and a desire to integrate them into the lives of the living.

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